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HEADLINE: Underground library preserves landmark

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BODY:

When St. John's College disclosed plans two years ago to turn Maryland's former Hall of Records into a library, preservationists were alarmed that extensive alterations might harm the Georgian Revival landmark.

But at a groundbreaking ceremony this week for the \$ 6.8 million project in Annapolis, the city's preservation watchdogs were full of praise.

That's because the college and its lead designer, Travis Price Architects of Takoma Park, found an innovative way to expand the library and respect the historic building at the corner of College Avenue and St. John's Street.

Instead of raising part of the roof, as they originally planned, the architects designed an expansion that would be largely underground and off to one side of the existing Hall of Records, leaving intact the shell of the building designed by noted Baltimore architect Laurence Hall Fowler.

The addition is so well concealed behind a low stone wall that it will hardly be noticeable from College Avenue or the St. John's campus.

Yet Mr. Price's design is not tame by any means. Known for his creative approach to problems, he produced spaces inside the Fowler building and the addition that are unlike any others on campus.

"It's the perfect combination," said Donna Ware, chairman of the Annapolis Historic District Commission. "For the preservationists, you have the retention of the character of an old building designed by one of Maryland's great architects. Yet, the college can grow, too, in a way that is new and fresh."

The project is significant because it returns the Hall of Records building to its intended use as a library and resource for people conducting research, Ms. Ware observed.

It also represents one of the first instances in recent years in which the commission approved a boldly modern addition to an older building, she said.

"The fact that a lot of it is underground helped it get approved. Here, it's subtle enough. But it's not your traditional Colonial Revival landscape next to your Colonial Revival building."

Students seem "very happy with the design," added college President Christopher Nelson. "It was a community

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effort if ever there was one."

The library will move from Woodward Hall, which dates from 1900. The college needed a new library to serve a student body that has doubled since 1900, from 250 to 500.

The former Hall of Records building was an ideal choice for the new library because it was already part of the campus visually. The college acquired it last year for \$ 700,000.

Henry H. Lewis Contractors Inc. of Owings Mills is the general contractor for the 29,000-square-foot library, which will provide enough space for the college to double its current collection of 95,000 books when it opens in the spring of 1996.

A former student at St. John's College, Mr. Price said he was willing to build an underground addition only if it didn't feel like a cellar. Fortunately, he was able to take advantage of the sloping terrain to create an elliptical addition that is 40 percent below grade. Skylights, light wells and sunken gardens will help keep it from feeling dark and cavelike, while a roof garden on top will be a new public space.

Inside the Fowler building, the first floor rooms around the perimeter will be restored. The inner core of the building, which housed the state archives on seven levels, will be gutted and redesigned to house books and offices on four floors.

One of the biggest changes will involve the way people move through the building. In the middle, the designers created a skylighted atrium with a curving staircase that will link three levels.

The architect said he tried to encourage free-ranging movement throughout the library by creating spaces that suit a variety of dispositions -- from the reader who likes to curl up in a quiet niche to someone who wants to be in the middle of a crowd. "It's a living room for the campus," he said.

Henson on housing

Baltimore Housing Commissioner Dan Henson will discuss the city's housing policy at a meeting Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, St. Paul and 20th streets. . . . A town meeting on the redesign of Rash Field and the west shore of the Inner Harbor planned for tomorrow has been postponed. . . . The Lyric Foundation will unveil a mural for the opera house during a reception Sunday from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. to celebrate the 100th anniversary of its opening.

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, AMY DAVIS/SUN STAFF PHOTO, Model of new library for St. John's College in Annapolis.

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